Billie Eilish and the Woke-Washing of Highland Park Gentrification

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The celebration of pop star extraordinaire Billie Eilish as the defiant "socially conscious voice of Generation Z" is being used to manipulate the narrative of the anti-gentrification struggle in her home neighborhood of Highland Park, Los Angeles.

Submitted by LavenderValentine on March 31, 2020

Ever since she came on to the pop music scene in 2016, Billie Eilish has unquestionably portrayed herself as the "authentic" alternative to what the public understands as the plastic and generic pop star. This particular "authenticity" isn't limited to her insisting on working with only her songwriter/producer brother in his bedroom over a conventional studio, or her refusal to show off her body even now that she's a fully grown adult, but the way her music and her image showcase a teenage savant grieving over a culture of self-destructive indulgence. With tracks lamenting over climate change, mental health, and teen drug use, and within her public statements concerning feminism and animal rights, Billie has indeed found importance by giving the world hope as the socially conscious voice of so-called "Generation Z". Many of Billie's fans have accused people on the political left of making unfair critique against her, but one could argue that she only caught the eye of the left in the first place due to her on-and-off relationship with radical politics. And it is very safe to say that Billie, at the start of her career, presented herself as someone who was going to bring the music industry to its knees by speaking truth to power and actively challenging many of the existing industry norms, which is what drew in that infatuation from the left to begin with. When Billie was accused of being an "industry plant" during the growth of her popularity, people on the left were the ones who came to her defense, because they saw her success as the result of a dissenting teenage girl actively taking the power back from the music industry's corporate elite (and thus upstaging the capitalist foundation of the industry). The left only became critical of her when she appeared to backpedal on that praxis by becoming fully immersed in the same corporate-capitalist paradigm against which her past words and actions indicated she was rebelling.

Nowhere is the inconsistency of Billie's flirtation with the political left more apparent than in her relationship with her home neighborhood. Her life was spent in the northeast Los Angeles neighborhood of Highland Park, which, since the late 2000s, has been the site of an ongoing struggle against gentrification. What is startling about her case in particular is how her celebrity (partially fueled, of course by, her own words) has been used to seize the narrative. When *Los Angeleno* asked Highland Park youth what they thought of their famous neighbor, the responses were less than flattering. A senior at the local Franklin High School remarked: "Yeah, she grew up here, a lot of people did. Highland Park already has its own name for itself. It's not like, '*Highland Park is Where Billie Eilish Grew Up*.' It's so much more than that. It just kinda sucks because Highland Park is already losing its culture, and she comes in bringing more of the loss with her." Another stated she didn't even listen to Billie's music nor did she care that much about her. The reoccurring trope is that Billie is an outsider, a transplant. She is from Highland Park but not *from* Highland Park.

Originally a working-class Latinx and multicultural neighborhood, gentrification started taking hold of Highland Park around the early 2000s, following the gentrification of nearby areas such as Silver Lake, Echo Park, and Eagle Rock. According to a report from 2002, there had already been plans to gentrify Figueroa (one of Highland Park's main streets) with the creation of an arts district and a Gold Line metro stop, the metro stop being completed in 2003. It is also known that around this time Highland Park became somewhat of a center for house-flipping, that being the purchase of houses in lower-income areas for pennies on the dollar in order to resell at a much higher price to higher income residents. A few new businesses which catered to a more white bourgeois consumer base began springing up in the area simultaneously. When the financial crisis hit in 2008, even more vicious investors dove in and began taking advantage of both the hundreds of newly-foreclosed homes and emerging new vibe at the expense of the original working-class Latinx residents, who also started to see their rents rise as el barrio began its transformation into a hipster utopia. It wasn't long before Highland Park became designated an "up and coming neighborhood" and was even given a flowery profile in *The New York Times*, almost certainly with the intention of attracting more young white middle-class movers (and investors). One also needs to keep in mind that this gentrification - in fact, the gentrification of several Los Angeles neighborhoods - was being supported by political policies. Money was poured into several so-called "development" projects made solely for the wealthy at the cost of the working poor, proving again how dictatorships of the bourgeoisie do not care about the poor and suffering. In Highland Park, the change happened so quickly that the neighborhood became known as the "ground zero for Los Angeles gentrification". By the early 2010s, the devastating effects of urban colonialism became all too apparent, with housing and rent prices skyrocketing and evictions of working-class families becoming commonplace. The local proletarian Latinx culture which had defined the area for decades was being taken over, erased, and destroyed in place of overpriced bars, coffee houses, and trendy vegan or fad diet restaurants. However, there is only so much capital can strangle a population before it is met with resistance. 2014 saw the first protests against displacement. The years that followed would be defined by waves of highly-publicized rent strikes and spontaneous acts of agitation art around the main streets. As of now, in 2020, Highland Park remains caught in the middle of a class war more heated than ever, with realtors and landlords continuing to force locals into homelessness (including 250 homeless students) and the LAPD establishing a new foot patrol specifically aimed at protecting gentrifier businesses from anti-gentrification activists.

There remains a certain politics of place when it comes to public figures representing a particular city or region. In hip hop, for instance, it is very common for artists to heavily associate their artistry with their hometowns (e.g. Nas with New York, Kanye West with Chicago, 21 Savage with Atlanta, and so on). It would be an understatement to say that this culture expects its artists to be grassroots and write from their own personal experiences, hence the significant emphasis on paying tribute to the city of one's upbringing. In most cases, the music reflects as well as publicizes the issues and overall environment of the artist's hometown, as was the case with early 90s Gangsta Rap showcasing gang violence and police brutality in Southern California, or 2010s so-called "mumble rap" highlighting opioid abuse which is very common in the American South. What this does in essence is present a particular narrative to the audience: what is this place? Who are the people here? What is the political and economic environment of this place? If the artist in question is quite popular, their portrayals of their home cities and regions can create a ripple effect; a *Vice* piece from 2018 focused on Drake's celebrity bringing in tourism revenue for the city of Toronto, mentioning how his popularity has brought a sense of optimism for Toronto residents who are proud to boast him. Likewise, when 21 Savage was revealed to have been an undocumented immigrant from the UK, residents of Atlanta overwhelmingly came to his defense as they saw him - despite his immigration status - as one of their own.

Billie Eilish has never shied away from proclaiming herself a native daughter of Highland Park. According to several interviews, Billie's parents bought a house and moved to the neighborhood from heavily-gentrified Silver Lake sometime in 2001 (historically speaking, this would have been right at the time when local politicians were lying down plans to gentrify). Billie has always been eager to mention how underprivileged her family was as her parents were failed actors and musicians, but what is neglected is how - sociologically speaking - so-called "starving artists" are often some of the first people brought in to a neighborhood in order to start the gentrification process. According to her mother Maggie Baird in an interview given in 2013 to promote an independent film she co-wrote and starred in, the family's income is described as such: "… [W]e have had serious financial setbacks because of lack of work as an actor and particularly related to my husband's work (in addition to being an actor he is a carpenter and used to work restoring and selling homes). One giant disaster in particular strained our family almost to our breaking point and it has taken a lot of strength and perseverance to recover from that." That "giant disaster" was the 2008 housing crisis. Baird elaborated on a time she and Billie's father fixed up and sold their neighbor's house in a 2014 documentary:

> "So flash forward. Now the house goes on sale. And we're like - 'oh my gosh. We've got to buy that [the neighbors'] house, because we, like, have to have some control over our neighborhood. And it's a horrible eyesore, like, in our opinion, like it had become like, they [the previous residents] had taken out the hardwood floors and they put in white tile. They'd taken out the river rock fireplace, thrown the rocks in the backyard, it was marble or something. They had - they just like completely, you know, taken away all of its historic character… So… We fixed up the house, and, you know, [*laughs*] we sold it. And here we had moved into this neighborhood like, 'oh we love our culturally diverse neighborhood, and oh and' - we sold that for the highest price we could [*laughs*] possibly get, to a lovely couple, you know, like with no criminal past at all, so. [*laughs*]"

To quote a user on Twitter, the focus isn't the backstory, but the ways in which transplants (gentrifiers and house-flippers) commonly view the homes and communities of the working class: beautiful things ruined by their former inhabitants which now need to be fixed and *controlled*. Flipping houses for "the highest price one could possibly get" to "lovely couples with no criminal past" often precedes future developers swooping in to resell affordable houses at exorbitantly higher prices, with banks following suit. Billie is obviously not at fault for the sins of her parents - whatever those may be - but from her mother's words one can clearly see the level of disconnect between her family and the rest of the original Highland Park community, not only materially but psychologically as well.

Regardless of the actual circumstances surrounding her upbringing, publications were eager to prop Billie up as the de facto "face" of Highland Park as her career was taking off. After all, her public image continues to revolve around her story of being a kid from a modest home who became a superstar after recording a single song in her brother's tiny bedroom, entirely propelled by an organic following rather than corporate trickery. Several of her promotional videos have featured Billie in Highland Park, the two most notable being her Hot Ones interview and Carpool Karaoke. Though nearly every article written about Billie has mentioned her residence (which is always "Highland Park", seldom just "Los Angeles"), it is Los Angeles-based media in particular that has made a piercing effort to showcase the special connection she holds to her neighborhood. A headline from *LA Magazine* proclaims: "Highland Park's Billie Eilish Sets a New Record for Grammy Nominations"; another from *The LA Times* in June of 2019 reads: "Billie Eilish, who came up in Highland Park, has nine tracks among the 200 most consumed songs so far this year." The attachment she has to her location is pivotal, and is arguably best articulated in a mini-documentary by *Complex* (via Pigeons & Planes) recorded in late 2017.

Every aspect of this profile is bent on portraying her as a down-to-earth homegirl. At the start, Billie introduces herself and her neighborhood, affirming that this is where she grew up. Attire-wise she is adorned with an oversized neon top, sport pants, a bucket hat, and a long chain which all give off a "hood" vibe. She frolics down York Boulevard, one of Highland Park's major streets (and a major epicenter of gentrification), until she arrives at Donut Friend, a vegan donut shop frequently targeted by local activist boycotts and vandalisms on account of being a "gentrifier business". She speaks glowingly of the company, mentioning how the owners supported her music career as it was taking off. Throughout the video, montages play of Billie strolling and squatting around town, sometimes inside stores, sometimes in front of pastel-colored murals. With the exception of Billie entering Galco's, a Latino-run old grocery shop, no relics of pre-gentrified Highland Park are shown in the segment; her natural habitat is clearly meant to be the world of sleek cafés and vintage shops. What could have featured Billie paying tribute to *el barrio* played out as an advertisement for Hipsterland. Later she is interviewed about her upbringing, telling the story of how her actor/musician parents homeschooled her so she and her brother could focus on music, dancing, and acting instead of standard academics. Even without a formal education, Billie comes off as quite insightful throughout this entire talk. The childhood memories she and her family members describe center around a perpetual bubble of talent shows, competitive dance recitals, and events with children of other entertainment industry professionals. This is the "new" Highland Park resident: a white face coming from a home-owning family of cultured Hollywood actors whose overall lifestyle is unconventional and hip, and who is made for material success.

But it isn't her artsy upbringing or unique fashion sense which makes Billie's celebrity the perfect fit for the gentrifier narrative; paradoxically it is her realness combined with her solemn social consciousness. It is not unusual for proponents of gentrification to legitimize the phenomenon by pushing the idea that the gentrifying class holds some kind of *progressive* ideals or lifestyles which the original working-class residents do not, or that gentrification itself brings in more ethical and sustainable enterprise, e.g. organic restaurants. This mentality is best identified as "woke-washing", the propagation of reactionary or oppressive policies using social justice as a decoy. And indeed, Billie's persona as the anti-Kardashian easily fits the paradigm. She has never embodied the mold of a typical pop star, nor is she vapid or frivolous. Says Eleanor Margolis in *Vogue UK*: "Eilish is everything the likes of Taylor Swift and Katy Perry are not. From her total lack of sexualisation in her aesthetic to the heavy use of horror film-esque visuals in her music videos, Eilish is ushering in a new era of pop." For over two years, Billie has been lauded as an artist committed to giving pop music meaning again. She is said to be a voice of conscience amid the late 2010s culture of face tuning, pill popping, and flexing. "Eilish is famous not only for her music but perhaps also for the sort of 'realness' or substance she represents to a generation eager for something genuine. Generation Z is a squad that came to age amidst the phenomenon of a 'filtered reality,' in which the many facets of individual existence are constantly curated, edited, and refined. The gloomy frankness of Eilish's music—and of her music videos—seems a bulwark against the halcyon imagery that often pervades contemporary media production," says Erielle Davidson in a March 2019 article in *The Federalist*. There is also no question social and emotional issues (which are themselves reflective of the status quo) are scattered throughout her music; one only needs to listen to her beautiful somber performance on "listen before I go" to hear her sing about suicidal depression, or lament her friends falling prey to drug addiction on "xanny", or sing about the world under climate change in "all the good girls to go hell". "Billie Eilish isn't stressing over the Grammys. She's busy worrying about the end of the world," says a hyperbolic headline from the *LA Times* published last December. Critics have even remarked that Billie, as the de facto voice of Generation Z, doesn't know the power of her own cultural influence.

When it comes to how her direct experiences have shaped Billie's authentic music and image, any talk of Highland Park's gentrification is almost completely obscured. Journalists instead focus on her home's fostering creative environment, or her extensive knowledge of popular culture. Although several publications have made note of Billie's intellect and concern for political issues (*NME* has even referred to her a "sustainable queen"), almost every single one has ignored pressing her on the subject of gentrification in her home neighborhood (and why should they, if her name and face are making these publications a lot of money?). To an outsider looking in, the whole notion of a class struggle being actively fought in Highland Park simply doesn't exist. And yet, when watching Billie stroll down Highland Park's Potemkin boulevards in Hypebeast attire it is impossible not to think about gentrification. It could be argued that Billie was disadvantaged growing up, and being disadvantaged should exempt her from responsibility regarding this issue. But this brings in the question of why her own childhood poverty wouldn't create a sense of empathy with the youth of Highland Park who are being gentrified out. Why is it that an artist who is so desperate to be seen as socially conscious never brings up the class struggle going on in her own backyard?

Though it is perhaps Billie's own words on her neighborhood which are the most revealing. In a 2017 interview with New Zealand-based *Coup De Main* magazine given early in her career, a then 15-year old Billie described gentrifying Highland Park as such: "It's kinda like a little hipster block party, almost. It's not huge, it's this little area. There's this one street called York, which is kinda where everything is. We moved there when it was affordable. It wasn't a great neighborhood and nobody really lived there. It wasn't a popular place at all, then over time, tons of stores and little shops popped up, and it's huge now, and kinda popping, which is weird. I think it's really cute. It's very homely, very comfortable."

Needless to say, when these comments resurfaced on Twitter in the fall of 2019, they caused a firestorm among Highland Park youth prompting hundreds of tweets:

"f*** you @billieeilish , highland park was popping way before you. Hope nobody be listening to this hipster a** c*** cause I sure won't no more" said one user by the handle @mon_ixa.

"hi @billieeilish I know you think no one lived in Highland Park when you were here, but I'm just going to let you know that due to gentrification and people like you, my people were kicked out of their homes & unable to afford this modern colonization. Speak the truth." stated user @abbymmunguia.

""Nobody really lived there" yes they damn did. A whole a** community actually. "And then over time tons of stores and little shops popped up." It's called gentrification sweetheart. I may not be from Highland Park, but I doubt NELA claims this b****."@nairobiceleste.

"gentrification is neocolonialism. wypipo think no one lives there until they move in. the comunidad was existent, vibrant, and brown before y'all whites decided to displace everyone there. f*** @billieeilish, we lived there. i can't go back to my hood without being gawked at"@aiurare.

These young Highland Park residents didn't find Billie's comments to be merely offensive, but *oppressive*. It is incredibly degrading to refer to a community on the verge of liquidation as "nobodies", to deny their existence and deny their current resistance. Granted, the standard counterpoint would be her age, that it is impossible for a 15-year old to fully understand the economic and political situation in her home neighborhood (one can see how quickly the conversation changes from gentrification to whether or not it is morally correct to hold a naïve teenager responsible for her words). This excuse is nonsense; 15-year olds who are facing evictions and homelessness with their families due to gentrification understand it perfectly well because they are forced to. It is their political reality. And one cannot leave out the irony of the wise-beyond-her-years teen either, how Billie has demanded to have her words taken seriously when speaking on subjects related to politics. She stated in an interview with *NME*: "Bro, teenagers know more about the country that we're living in right now than anybody." Regardless of her age, or whether or not her 2017 comments were made from ignorance or malice, it is obvious her young mind must have been conditioned to think in that manner. Had her family been negatively affected by the gentrification her words on the subject would not have been so fulsome. Instead, she implies (whether knowingly or not) that she is taking the side of the gentrifiers. How out-of-place is it for a teenage girl who has become pop music's progressive counter-power to make proclamations littered with overtones of casual bourgeois chauvinism? It should be noted that neither Billie's PR nor popular gossip ("tea") sites responded to this controversy, even though it arguably has far greater implications than Billie's Instagram posts about mink fur or words against Lady Gaga's meat dress. Had Billie herself publicly apologized for her past ignorant statements, she could have mended relations with the Highland Park Latinx community and proven herself to stand by her "woke" principles. Instead, she (and the tea pages) chose to ignore it all together.

What is also highly significant in this commotion is the extent by which the Tweets of outrage by Highland Park youth depict an over-arching psychological effect of gentrification: the feeling of being an outsider in one's own homeland. Working-class communities are often built around interdependence on one another, gentrification redesigns the neighborhood around capital. Communal spaces are re-imagined into commercial spaces, homes which were once upheld as places for families are now upheld only by how much they can profit investors. As the demographic forcefully changes from proletarian to rich, brown or black to white, renter to homeowner, the sense of home starts to disappear as bourgeois newcomers seldom acknowledge the previous residents or the culture they've already established. What seemed to anger the young Highland Park residents on Twitter the most about Billie's "nobody really lived there" and "we moved there when it was affordable" comments was how they are indicative (intentionally or not) of these attitudes. In an interview from 2018, Billie made more disparaging remarks towards Highland Park by stating, "A lot of people who don't live in L.A. think that in order to live here you have to be rich and live in some really nice neighborhood and have a lot of money. It's not true. I grew up in Highland Park when it was very sketchy and there were lots of gunshots." Pre-gentrified Highland Park is something she only publicly recollects by its worst aspects (a virtually empty "gang-infested shithole" full of up-for-grabs cheap housing that "rose from the ashes" as soon as white hipsters moved in and changed the neighborhood's character). Once again, the narrative presented here - intentionally or not - is that gentrifiers serve as rescuers, with the assumption that working-class people of color are unable to resolve issues of gun violence and poverty on their own, or that anything they created before gentrification took over is irrelevant. This is the story the corporate media obviously loves. The fact Billie can place herself in opposition all while continuing to be the public "face" of the neighborhood is further confirmation for Highland Park proles that the values of their original community have already been uprooted and replaced. Their most famous resident doesn't represent *el barrio* but gentrification station.

During the gentrification process, this belittling of pre-gentrified communities is often defined by paradox: while gentrifiers may disregard the neighborhood's original culture, they also hold a sense of envy. Gentrifiers will move into a proletarian neighborhood - almost always defined by people of color - and fawn over the area's existing culture. However, at the same time, they insist the original residents *do not know their own self-worth* and remain "backwards" and "underdeveloped" despite their ability to charm the gentrifying class with their cultural ornaments. As such, the gentrifiers see it as their duty to fix the neighborhood by taking up everything unique about the local culture and redefining it so that it fits their hyper-modernist sensibilities, and through this, showing the original residents how to do their culture "correctly". Since the original residents are of the underclass, it is assumed they won't notice (of course, they *do* notice, but this does little to stop the process). From their own point-of-view, gentrifiers make better original residents than the actual original residents. From the point-of-view of the original residents, this is nothing more than degradation, especially when factoring in the importance of cultural artifacts such as food and fashion in maintaining the sense of togetherness. Gentrifiers not only erase and replace the shared history of the working-class, but insist by doing so they hold a moral high ground: they are helping the area "progress" by introducing $15 soft shell "tacos" made from tofu and coleslaw all while phasing out Mexican-owned taco trucks. The redefinition of the neighborhood and its culture becomes just another white man's burden, with white liberal arrogance as the new civilizing mission.

And it is this ideology of gentrification which is arguably reflected in Billie's celebrity. It would be a mistake to reduce this all down to a simple matter of cultural appropriation, since there is a larger agenda at stake. Billie's public persona has arguably been constructed in such a way where she is simultaneously the "blackest" girl in the room and "whitest" girl in the room, figuratively speaking. Blackest, in that she immerses in aspects distinctly associated with contemporary black culture (trap music, streetwear, neck chains, black vernacular speech, etc.) to the point where she is considered to be a part of hip hop and receives credit from this cultural sphere which has historically been reluctant to accept whites. Whitest, in that she fits the archetype of a "basic white girl" complete with bad girl empowerment anthems, melancholy attitude, neon hair, flat indie chick whisper vocals, and so on (as one black female Twitter user pointed out, Billie can appropriate Blackness everywhere except for that [black female] singing voice). Commenting on her multiple Grammy wins, Spencer Kornhaber writes in *The Atlantic*: "Eilish's shtick is a patchwork of influences, and the most important of them might be hip-hop. Rap culture informs her oversized track suits, her way of speaking, her rat-a-tat vocal delivery, and the trap percussion of her songs; she has been quick to praise hip-hop and work with emcees. Rap, however, doesn't usually fare well at the Grammys.… The "rock" of her identity mostly comes down to a chain-laden and heavy-lidded image that recalls a lineage stretching through Sid Vicious and Garbage's Shirley Manson. Race is clearly part of this image. The rappers Travis Scott and Lil Uzi Vert have a similar fashion sense to Eilish, and their music overtly interpolates rock. But they are culturally consumed, primarily, as hip-hop artists, with little chance of earning a top prize at the Grammys." On a more striking note, it is this duality which ultimately becomes the basis of white chauvinism, with Billie's *basic white girl* image inexplicably enabling her to become a "better" black woman than actual black women, since within her expropriated blackness - as pointed out by Kornhaber - she is able to incorporate a sense of universalism ("her music is different"). By contrast, young black female artists are often typecast in the music industry (as are Latinas) and are seldom allowed to express versatility or transcend genres. There is no better asset, then, for pop music than a young white woman showing its black women how to be "real" black women.

It is precisely this need to maintain the second half of her image as a *basic white girl* which requires Billie to keep a certain distance from people of color and their issues. A much more glaring - and often overlooked - example can be seen in the controversy surrounding her feature on the track "Sirens" from Denzel Curry's 2018 *TA13OO* album. The song in question, arguably one of the most emotionally-gripping tracks on the album, is a fiery call-to-arms which addresses police lynchings of minorities (including the death of Curry's own brother). It unquestionably took bravery on Billie's part to do that track, bravery which put her in hot water with her label, as it refused to allow her feature to be credited due to the song's political content. Interscope's reaction was nothing out of the ordinary; one only needs to look at White America's backlash against Colin Kaepernick and his kneeling during the national anthem a few years prior to see how standing against systematic racism can tarnish a reputation. A then 16-year old Billie singing a hook about "a time to stand your ground" is not something her label or PR team could tolerate, because it theoretically indicates a casting away of white liberalism and a commitment to being a white comrade. Once an innocent white girl becomes a white comrade she inevitably forfeits the ability to ever again be seen as "the whitest girl in the room", given how one loses all innocence once their politics become overtly radical. It is no doubt for this reason that Billie has never publicly brought up why she was left uncredited on Curry's song. (This incident might also call into question the extent of Billie's creative control: if she had the level of creative control which she often claims her feature would have remained credited.)

So is she Scarlett O'Hara or Marilyn Buck? Whatever the case, it is arguably that same discrepancy she must take when it comes to black issues which explains the lack of solidarity between Billie and the proletarian Highland Park community in face of displacement. Needing to appear palatable to White America's consumers and their 11-year old daughters, any real "wokeness" she displays must be controlled. Her cavalier attitude from three years ago ("nobody really lived there") was certainly made from her own ignorance, but her continued silence on the subject could very well be out of her new position as a mega-star. (Granted, this is someone who has always insisted she refuses to let the industry take advantage of her.) And it is certainly the case that her celebrity is being joyfully used as soft power by the gentrification machine. In a long profile article written by Ann Powers for NPR one can see how precisely the narrative surrounding Highland Park is shaped:

> "As much as she is a product of the culture of the weird achiever, Eilish is also a child of gentrification. Highland Park, the Northeast Los Angeles neighborhood where she grew up — where she and [her brother] Finneas made their album and where, in her cozy, pillow-strewn family home, she often conducts interviews — has been transformed in the 21st century from a (gang-plagued) home to working-class Latinx families to a hipster paradise. It may seem to anyone who follows her media presence that Eilish came from the lost Island of Free Time, where she and Finneas were homeschooled in creative play and fed spaghetti and broccoli by their loving mom. That's all true. It's also true that, despite frequently being lauded as a better teen choice than Britney Spears, Eilish is as much a showbiz kid as were her Mickey Mouse Club and American Idol forebears. Highland Park's aspirational bourgeoisie includes mid-tier movie folk like production designers and veteran actors like her own parents, making community with visual artists, café owners, academics and New Age-aware physical therapists. It's exactly the kind of milieu where weird achievers are deeply nurtured. Hollywood craft and knowledge, her inheritance, is part of what makes her a prodigy, and a pop star. Noise still hits the mainstream most successfully when it's well managed."

Notice that the discussion around the damaging social effects of gentrification is trivialized in favor of celebrating its artistic pioneers. Once again, there is no mention of evictions, homelessness (including the 250 homeless students currently waking up in motels or cars), uprooting of vibrant Latinx culture, increased police presence to attack anti-gentrification activists, or any kind of bottom-up resistance from the threatened community. In an article from *Zocalo* Joe Mathews writes: "Eilish's Highland Park, by contrast, is a messy mash-up of a neighborhood, far more urban than suburban. Its homes and apartment buildings, stuffed onto small lots, include every California architectural style. And its corridors feature an artsy-gritty mix of fancy coffee shops, downscale restaurants, and tattoo parlors, sometimes all on the same block. Eilish—who favors baggy clothes, piercings, and a shock of neon-green hair—fits right in… It's not hard to see how Highland Park influenced Eilish the artist. Her music, like her neighborhood, is a mash-up. Each song on her album seems to nod to a different genre—rap, grunge, rock, emo. What her songs have in common is her magical voice—and a sensibility that mixes darkness and light." This almost mythological view, relating her music to a Highland Park from which Billie has herself implied she was alienated, links the "darkness" of pre-gentrification (gang violence, "uncivilized" terrain) to the "light" of post-gentrification (trendy commercial spaces made for the middle class). Serious discussion of class struggle is not on the menu.

Billie is obviously not responsible for the sinister behavior of realtors and landlords, but she is certainly responsible for her own complicity, serving as gentrified Northeast LA's de facto cultural ambassador. Having a "socially conscious" face such as hers celebrating the transformation of her neighborhood to a pricey bourgeois hell masks the actual reality. When Billie said to *NME*: "…[T]o see young people taking part in peaceful protests and not obeying is beautiful," she did not mean the ongoing demonstrations by Highland Park teens, or the vandalisms against gentrifier businesses by outlaw activists. The public relationship she displays towards her neighborhood heavily implies she is choosing to remain ignorant on the subject. Regardless as to how much she expresses her love of *The Boondocks* and political hip hop or how sustainable her merchandise is, when she remains neutral (or takes the side of the political right) on an issue so close to her home she tragically repudiates her image as a politically conscious songstress. Social practice cannot be subtracted from "subversiveness".

The answer of course isn't self-flagellation but solidarity. No one should doubt the ability of artists to battle injustice when they have the power to do so. We only have to look towards the work of the late Nipsey Hussle who actively sought to fight gentrification in his home South LA neighborhood. According to an article from the LA Times written soon after his assassination: "In the months before Hussle was gunned down in front of his clothing store in late March, the rapper was working to bring economic development to the blighted blocks around Slauson and Crenshaw Boulevard, but on his own terms. He wanted more for his community, but he wanted to the changes to be driven from within… And Hussle, an activist who has been hailed for never abandoning his 'hood even after earning a Grammy nomination, had also derived a way to have residents invest alongside him. The plan was to crowdfund from each community and give residents an ownership stake in every project created in their neighborhood." This was all in response to the multitude of policies driven by LA mayor Eric Garcetti for a so-called "revitalization", a perpetual selling out the city to high-end investors throughout the 2010s. Hussle's own Crenshaw hood was heavily affected as there were plans to build nearly a thousand high-end developments in preparation for the 2028 Olympics. Attempts were even made to evict Hussle's own Marathon Clothing store by the authorities on the basis that it provided a haven for gang members, when it served as something of a community center. Almost a year after his passing, suspicions concerning the link between Hussle's activism and murder remain, as the LAPD had been monitoring his activity in the weeks leading up to his death. One thing is for certain: Hussle fought Mayor Garcetti's plan to gentrify his hood; Billie - who featured in a PSA with Garcetti in 2018 - has yet to do the same. Now, Northeast LA gentrification is more rampant than ever, with the so-called "voice of Generation Z" remaining entirely silent on the matter.

Billie is a lot smarter than people give her credit for. She knows where the clout is and moves towards it at every turn. It's for this reason she went against both her label and PR team in order to publicly memorialize XXXTentacion: she knew that despite his multiple domestic abuse charges and history of misogynistic violence she would gain far more clout from attaching herself to him than remaining quiet on his passing. Early in her career, she based the bulk of her image on the notion she was DIY, anti-corporate, and anti-industry. Soon after her career exploded, she took a nose-dive back into the corporate world through a slew of product endorsement deals with billion-dollar companies and began celebrating the same music industry she once claimed to loathe (and let's face it: Billie has proven herself to be a phenomenally good money-maker for the music industry). The same pop establishment which her success was supposed to have subverted has now rewarded her with five Grammys, a performance at the Oscars, a coveted *James Bond* theme song, and more hype than most artists see in their lifetimes. Perhaps the most overlooked negative consequence of celebrity in the age of SoundCloud and Instagram is how it festers class-collaboration to a much more dangerous degree. There may be clout in a teenage girl from a working-class background defying her corporate overlords, but there is even more clout in obtaining and flexing riches and luxury. And that's exactly the problem in an industry like pop music which is heavily predicated on white supremacy and patriarchy, where notoriety belongs to those who can reproduce said social structures rather than move against them. Is it any surprise that she seemed to lambast hip hop culture only a few days after her Grammy win? If Billie Eilish truly were a modern-day Joan Baez, a musical Jean Seberg, or an anglophone Violeta Parra, she wouldn't have anything close to the amount of fame she currently possesses at this moment. Perhaps she can see her own refusal to comply with the capitalist gatekeepers of the music industry in her Highland Park neighbors' refusal to comply with the white supremacist capitalist system which is causing their displacement, but the chances now appear slim to none, because there will always be more clout in defecting to reactionary politics than sticking with radical ones.

United States, Los Angeles, music, gentrification, celebrities, popular culture

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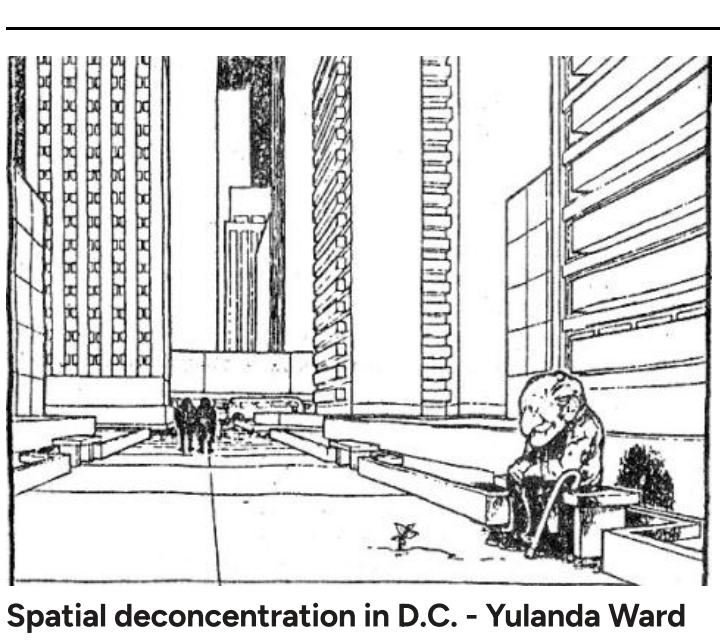

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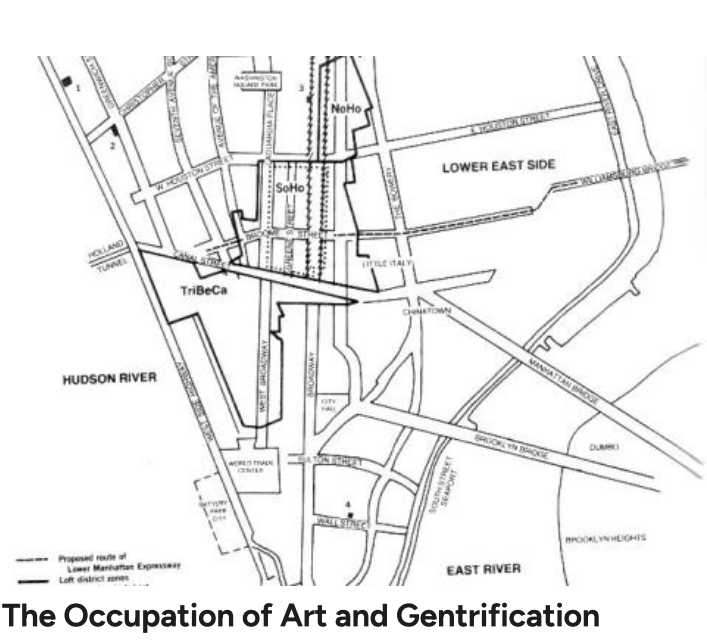

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